

agCOMPLISH

2024



'IT'S POSSIBLE!'

PLANT SCIENCE BIOTECHNOLOGY ALUMNA FULFILLS
CHILDHOOD DREAM OF BECOMING A DOCTOR



FORT VALLEY
STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE of
AGRICULTURE,
FAMILY SCIENCES
and TECHNOLOGY

*Photo credit: Daniel Shippey/Philadelphia College of
Osteopathic Medicine (PCOM) South Georgia*



CONTENTS:

- 2** **Putting on the Armor of Service**
Alumna makes a difference in environmental health
- 5** **Innovation**
Extension engineer promotes land-grant mission
- 8** **'I love Ag'**
- 10** **Focused**
Alumnus path leads to doctoral studies in California
- 12** **Fulfilling a Dream, Pursuing an Opportunity**
Agriculture educator fosters student growth
- 14** **'It's Possible!'**
Plant science biotechnology alumna fulfills childhood dream of becoming a doctor
- 18** **We Before Me**
A commitment to service sets alumnus up for success
- 20** **Roll with It**
Alumna builds bridges by taking chances
- 23** **Maintaining the Operation**
Extension farm manager sustains 1,176 acres to aid in Extension and research projects
- 26** **Students on the Rise**

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PUTTING ON THE ARMOR OF SERVICE

Alumna makes a difference in environmental health



By Latasha Ford

Caroline Obi saw firsthand the injustices out her own backdoor growing up in Nigeria. Her giving parents and the inequitable experiences that many of her friends faced opened her heart to service.

“I consider myself blessed to have been raised in a family who was able to provide and expose me to other cultures,” she said.

However, she observed environmental inequities in her home country. She recalled befriending the children at an orphanage who she visited with her siblings and parents, Gabriel and Caroline Obi, to celebrate their birthdays.

“These were my friends. I was concerned about being able to exist and survive in an environment where if I pushed for my goals, I could see the results and have the resources to realize my life’s purpose,” she said.

Even as a child, Obi always desired to be in a position where she could help improve people’s conditions.

“At the time, I didn’t know the title of environmental health or public health. I just knew that at some point in my career, I wanted to be an advocate in my community for children who are underserved so they can be in the best environment where they can be healthy and realize their full potential,” Obi said.

What made sense for her was the path of medical school. However, after becoming a doctor, she knew her calling was not based on the four walls of a consulting room.

“I wanted to be more involved in the community and behind the scenes in understanding regulations that protect and prevent illnesses that are 100% preventable,” she said. “I discovered children’s environmental health, and I knew for sure that I wanted to advance my career in public health.”

Fort Valley State University’s (FVSU) Master of Public Health (MPH) Program appealed to her due to its hybrid format and the possibility to explore professional opportunities through research. Her first semester as a Wildcat opened the door to working with her mentor, Dr. Oreta Samples, FVSU assistant professor and MPH Program coordinator. It also opened the door for interning with the National Environmental Health Association for the New York State Department of Health’s Environmental Health.

She worked on a public health policy project to study the influence of environmental compounds on breastfeeding.

However, it was her second year as a graduate student that sealed the deal with a career in public health. Accompanying Samples to the Georgia Environmental Health Association Conference, Obi learned about the Georgia Department of Public Health’s Healthy Homes and Lead Poisoning Prevention Program.

“With the changes being made to the program such as lowering the levels of lead from 5 micrograms per deciliter to 3.5 micrograms per deciliter, they anticipated more cases and would be hiring new district lead coordinators,” Obi noted.

She decided to apply and received a job offer as the district lead and healthy homes coordinator for the Environmental Health section in District 5-2 (North Central Health District) in Macon, Georgia. Obi was thrilled to earn this role in 2022 during her final year of graduate school.

Caroline Obi conducts research on a white-tailed deer specimen for a tick-borne disease while studying at Fort Valley State University in the Master of Public Health Program.



The MPH graduate's duties involve performing home assessments once notified by the regional lead coordinator about a child in her district who has a high level of lead poisoning. She then contacts the parents and educate them about the program, potential harm of lead poisoning and the need to have a home assessment. Obi uses a device that can immediately detect the presence of lead in the home and sometimes collects water and soil samples. The results allow for her to locate the source and then share the report of low-cost or no-cost recommendations by federal and state agencies with the parents. She is responsible for enforcing regulations to protect children, writing abatement orders, and reviewing work plans for clearance to ensure hazard reduction and control.

"We focus on children who are 6 years old and under," Obi said. "That age is crucial because that is the fastest rate at which they are developing."

She explained that childhood lead exposure can slow the mental capacity and development of a child, including their growth and learning behavior. She noted many of the issues are preventable. She serves 13 counties and does collaborative work with childcare providers, community organizations and other public health programs like Children's First, Women Infants and Children (WIC), and the epidemiology program.

"Public health is implementing preventive strategies, promoting resources and educating," Obi declared. "A lot of the issues that exist is because people don't know or have the resources."

The most fulfilling part of her job is having that one-on-one contact with parents and seeing the drop of blood lead levels in those children affected.

"It makes me feel good. It has been a learning opportunity. I consider myself blessed and lucky to serve and start my career path in public health, specifically in children's environmental health," Obi said, also praising her amazing team.

Grateful for the many opportunities, she is paying it forward by doing what she always wanted to do.

"I am putting on the armor to follow my calling," she said. "I always knew as a child that I wanted

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At the time, I didn't know the title of environmental health or public health. I just knew that at some point in my career, I wanted to be an advocate in my community for children who are underserved so they can be in the best environment where they can be healthy and realize their full potential.
”

to work for a government agency. I wanted to understand the regulations and what it would take to have a voice to effect change in communities whether nationwide or globally."

She said the key to serving in her role is a combination of technical and personal skills. She added it is crucial to have a good understanding of environmental laws and regulations at all levels. It takes possessing effective communication skills to educate and interact with the public, health professionals and key decision-makers.

"The manpower that goes behind making sure that every place we live, learn and play in is safe, every food we put in our mouths is safe to eat, water is safe to drink, and the pool is safe to swim in, some countries do not have that luxury," Obi said. "It stays on the backbones of environmental health professionals."

The district lead and healthy homes coordinator is excited about where she is right now but also about what more is expected of her. She desires to serve in a Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Unit to continue her mission of prevention and treatment of health issues in children that arise from environmental exposures.

Motivated by her parents, Obi is humble and grateful.

"That was part of my siblings and my upbringing, which I maintain today," she said.



INNOVATION

Extension engineer promotes land-grant mission

By Russell Boone Jr.

A rural upbringing, an interest in technology and a popular television show propelled Dr. Cedric Ogden to pursue a career in education and agricultural engineering.

Dr. Cedric Ogden

Ogden, a native of Fort Valley, Georgia, graduated in 2004 from Fort Valley State University with a Bachelor of Science degree in agricultural engineering. He is an Extension engineer and professor for FVSU's College of Agriculture, Family Sciences and Technology where his main duties include grantsmanship, research development, project management and engineering course instruction

"I enjoy the ability to be creative while addressing global issues through research and outreach," he said.

The FVSU professor said that his interest in technology was sparked by a need to improve outdoor activities such as car maintenance and landscaping.

"As a youth, I was also fond of the television (TV) series MacGyver."

MacGyver was a long running TV show. It featured the work of an agent using technical knowledge with everyday items to solve complicated problems.

When it was time to select where to go to college, Ogden, who was born and raised in Peach County, said FVSU was the obvious choice after graduating from high school.

"Fort Valley State had a sense of home as well as family tradition. My parents (Everlyn and Foster Ogden), sister (Terolyn Ogden), wife (Curla Ogden) and several aunts, uncles and cousins all graduated from the university," Ogden said.

As an undergraduate student, Ogden credits Dr. Chau Nguyen, former FVSU professor and department head of the agricultural engineering program, for serving as his mentor.

"Dr. Nguyen walked me through freshman orientation, served as my advisor and aided me in applying for scholarships and graduate school," he said.

Furthermore, for three of his four years in school, Ogden was a full-time FVSU student and full-time employee at Dan River Incorporated, a textile company.

Working the shift from 4 p.m.-12 a.m. Monday through Friday limited his chances to participate in extracurricular activities and internships.

Despite his busy schedule, Ogden still managed to gain fond memories as a student by earning awards during FVSU's annual Honors Convocation and Homecoming Week.



Ogden (center) visits with employees and contractors from Georgia Power and Infrastructure and Energy Alternatives (IEA) Inc., at FVSU's solar farm site.

"Right before my senior year, Dan River shut down. That allowed me to become a member

of the Gamma Zeta Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity. There, I met brothers for life that provided me with enough memories to last a lifetime," Ogden said.

After graduating from FVSU, Ogden decided to pursue his master's and doctoral degrees in agricultural and biological engineering at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana.

"I selected Purdue after meeting the head of the agricultural and biological engineering department at an engineering conference in Florida. After the meeting, I took an interest in an opportunity for bioenergy graduate research."

Upon his return from Purdue in 2011, Ogden was offered and immediately accepted his current position at FVSU.

Even though he is now an instructor at his alma mater, Ogden can fully relate to his students after sitting in those same desks as an undergraduate.

"I see myself in the seats of the students as they seek to balance academics with social life and personal growth. I feel obligated to provide them with a service to guide them in handling academic pressures, time management and quests for future educational and employment opportunities."

In addition to his academic duties, the bulk of Ogden's research focuses on the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and alternative energy sources, particularly solar.

"Both technologies and sources assist with global issues. The use of UAVs can be applied to helping

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Alternative fuels and solar energy help address the energy crisis by reducing dependence on finite resources and providing renewable and sustainable power sources that aid in addressing climate change.
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surveilling areas during a disaster response, monitoring environmental occurrences and infrastructure inspection. Alternative fuels and solar energy help address the energy crisis by reducing dependence on finite resources and providing renewable and sustainable power sources that aid in addressing climate change,” Ogden said.

Furthermore, the FVSU Extension engineer says that UAV and alternative fuel technologies will be needed as the world’s population increases. He said their use may help alleviate pressure on air, land and water resources by providing information for efficient environmental practices.

With Ogden’s expertise, FVSU has one of the largest solar farms located on a college campus in the U.S. with a 107-acre complex.

Built in collaboration with Georgia Power Company, the farm consists of more than 27,000 solar panels, is connected to a sub-station, and has a model demonstration site dedicated for academic and research purposes.

“We anticipate a curriculum and training for student workforce development in the renewable energy sector,” Ogden said.

The FVSU professor said that agricultural engineering students will benefit from the arrangement by getting the opportunity to get hands on experience. Future plans include teaching students how to install and design equipment, develop software and develop ideas focusing on energy policy.

Ogden’s work has garnered attention from national organizations. In 2023, The Association of Public and Land Grant Universities (APLU) recently honored him with the 1890’s Regional Award for Individual Excellence in Extension. It is awarded to a person who promotes innovative engagement with diverse communities by

using technology to address economic and environmental challenges.

“It is gratifying and truly an honor to be recognized on a national stage for my vision, research and outreach efforts to benefit communities through technological advances,” Ogden said.



“There is a sense of purpose and resolve to assist in organizational changes that support diversity, pluralism and innovation in a program that effectively impacts our Extension audiences.”

The 43-year-old FVSU alumnus takes great pride in receiving an award on behalf of his alma mater and attributes it to the values instilled in him as an undergraduate student. “To receive this award is a testament to the quality education, support and foundation provided by FVSU. I’m grateful for the opportunities to proudly carry the spirit of this institution forward.”

(From left to right) Dr. Keith Howard, dean of Fort Valley State University’s College of Agriculture; Dr. Brou Kouakou, associate dean for research; Dr. Cedric Ogden, Extension engineer and professor and Dr. Mark Latimore Jr., associate dean for Extension. Dr. Cedric Ogden accepts the 1890’s Regional Award for Individual Excellence in Extension from the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities (APLU) in Seattle, Washington.

'I LOVE AG'

By Latasha Ford

Samantha Sherman (known by many as Sam) loves science, gardening and birdwatching. She fit right in as an aggie Wildcat when pursuing a master's degree at Fort Valley State University. Sherman is originally from Scituate, a small town in Rhode Island, but has been living in Georgia for more than half her life. She earned a Bachelor of Science in biology from Middle Georgia State University in 2018 and then a Master of Science in biotechnology from FVSU in 2021. She is now extending her skills and experience at her alma mater as a research assistant in Dr. Nirmal Joshee's laboratory.



Why did you pursue becoming a Wildcat in agriculture at Fort Valley State University?

"I became interested in the biotechnology graduate program while I was an undergraduate at Middle Georgia State University. Dr. Nirmal Joshee came to talk about the program and his lab. I had already been interested in medicinal plants, as well as plant propagation and plant tissue culture, for some time. When I learned I could do that work at Fort Valley, I knew this would be a good place for me to pursue my master's degree."

Who or what inspired you to study your major?

"I was inspired by many of my past professors who helped me as an undergrad, as well as my parents who always pushed me to pursue my education."

What agricultural science project impacted your life as a student? Why?

“As a student, I always loved having science projects where we got to grow something. I can remember growing herbs in the classroom as an elementary student and using them to make a pizza sauce. I think it is great when we can put our time into making good high-quality food that we can enjoy eating.”

Why did you return to your alma mater to lend your research skills?

“I decided to return to FVSU because I love the work I am doing here. It means a lot to me to be able to continue working on the projects that have become so important to me. Being here gives me the opportunity to continue to learn about biotechnology while being able to share that same knowledge with others.”

What are your duties as a research assistant? Do you work a lot with students?

“As a research assistant, I train graduate students and interns in the lab, teach the labs for graduate courses, maintain our in vitro germplasm composed of more than 25 plant species, oversee greenhouse operations, maintain lab equipment, order supplies for the lab and greenhouse, and conduct experiments in the lab.”

What unique opportunities have you been afforded while serving in this role?

“I have been given the chance to serve as ambassador on the board of the American Council for Medicinally Active Plants. In addition to presenting at last year’s conference and this year’s upcoming conference, I helped organize last year’s conference, as well as this year’s upcoming conference, which will be at West Virginia State University this October. I have also been able to continue publishing my research, which is very important to me. I have published six peer-reviewed journal articles and one book chapter and have more manuscripts in the works for the future.”

What is your elevator speech to encourage students to pursue a degree in agriculture?

“The things we need the most in life are food, clothing and shelter. If we don’t have those basic needs met, we can’t do much else. Agriculture is the way food is made available to the world, and it feels good knowing that I contribute to that. My contribution might be very different than my grandfather’s (who was a farmer), but it is something I am very proud of.”

How are you using your research experience to help others, and what are your future goals?

“I think being able to work with my students and teaching them in the lab is a great way that I can help others. Also, being able to publish the research I do for medicinal plants gives me a chance to help others in a couple of ways. First, by enlightening people about the medicinal plants I work with and to facilitate other researchers to do better work with these plants. For my future goals, I am interested in getting a Ph.D. soon so that I can have more chances to move further in research or academics.”

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FOCUSED

Alumnus path leads to doctoral studies in California

By Russell Boone Jr.

A football game and a love for animals convinced Darrell Sparks to enroll at Fort Valley State University (FVSU).

Sparks, a native of Columbus, Georgia, earned his Bachelor of Science degree in animal science (2019) and Master of Science degree in plant biotechnology (2022) from FVSU's College of Agriculture, Family Sciences and Technology.

Prior to enrolling at FVSU, Sparks worked two jobs for two years. This included working as a custodian at the main post exchange in Fort Benning, Georgia, and at a local chicken plant in Pine Mountain, Georgia, where he worked the overnight shift.

The 31-year-old is currently a doctoral student at the University of California-Davis (UC Davis) in Davis, California. He took time out of his busy schedule to briefly discuss his experience as an FVSU student, why he selected the middle Georgia institution and his matriculation to The Golden State to further his studies.



Why did you decide to attend FVSU?

As a small child, I would always go to the Fountain City Classic football game in Columbus, Georgia, featuring Albany State University and Fort Valley State University. For some reason, I was always drawn to root for Fort Valley even though I knew nothing about the school. When I got older and decided to go to college, FVSU was my first choice.

What inspired you or who influenced you to select your undergraduate major?

I have always loved animals. As a young child I would adopt injured animals, and that inspired my dream to be a veterinarian. So, when I started my undergrad degree, I chose veterinary technology, but I was later advised to switch my major to animal science. I graduated with my animal science degree in December of 2019.

How would you describe your undergraduate experience at FVSU?

I had an untraditional pathway to college because I worked for two years before I started. Coming to

campus my freshman year was scary, but exciting at the same time. I made great connections with students and faculty alike and FVSU feels like family. The experience that I gained at FVSU laid the foundation and opened the door for where I am today.

Who would you consider to be your mentor(s) at FVSU?

Dr. Brou Kouakou, Dr. Sarwan Dhir, Dr. Steven Samuels, Dr. Hari Singh, Dr. Mohammed Ibrahim, Dr. Nirmal Joshee and Dr. Jacques Surrency were all great mentors to me during my undergraduate and graduate studies at FVSU.

Did you participate in any extracurricular activities while you were a student at FVSU?

I was a part of many clubs and extracurricular activities including Future Farmers of America (FFA), the Animal Science Club, Emerging Leaders Interactive Training and Experience (Elite) Program and the Minorities in Agriculture Natural Resources and Related Science (MANNRS).

Did you have an internship(s) at FVSU? If yes, where were they located and what were your responsibilities?

While in undergrad, I took a study abroad trip to Honduras with other animal science majors. There, we learned about international agriculture. I also participated in an internship at the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri. There, I measured the root growth under drought stress on wheat seeds. During the master's program at FVSU, I participated in an internship with UC Davis to study the spread and impact of *Ralstonia* (a bacterium that causes plants to wilt) in agriculture.

Why did you select the university of California Davis (UC Davis) to pursue your doctorate degree?

The internship at UC Davis, called Plant Agricultural Biology Graduate Admissions Pathways Program (PABGAP), offers a "pathway" into UC Davis by funding five years of a Ph.D. program to any of its participants. And since UC Davis is a world leader in plant research, I figured that it would be the perfect school to continue my education and receive my doctoral degree.

What is your major at UC Davis? How do you feel about representing FVSU at UC Davis?

I am part of the graduate group of Horticulture and Agronomy. UC Davis wasn't created for people like me. My presence alone challenges stereotypes and says that I beat the odds. I have the unique opportunity to help forge a path for the bright, Black scholars behind me and I take it seriously. This opportunity is humbling, and it feels amazing.



Sparks conducts an experiment as part of his graduate studies at the University of California-Davis.

What advice would you give to a student seeking a graduate degree once they complete their undergraduate studies?

To have a plan going into grad school for what you want to do for your future, and while you're in graduate school prepare for your future career plan.

Can you tell us your plans once you complete your studies at UC Davis?

I want to help my community by providing access to quality food and alternatives to medicines and pharmaceuticals using chemicals to those in the form of herbal supplements and natural remedies.

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From the Peach State to the Golden State

Since 2017, the University of California at Davis (UC-Davis) has conducted the Plant Agricultural Biology Graduate Admissions Pathways Program (PABGAP).

The purpose of PABGAP is to provide and prepare students for graduate study in plant agriculture biology from Fort Valley State University (FVSU), Tuskegee University (TU) and Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU).

During the summer sessions, students chosen for the PABGAP Program are individually mentored by faculty at UC-Davis. UC-Davis is considered one of the nation's elite institutions in the fields of agricultural, plant and environmental sciences.

Selected PABGAP scholars receive a \$5,000 stipend. UC-Davis also covers the costs of housing, meals and travel to Davis.

Presently, 10 undergraduate and nine graduate students from FVSU have participated in PABGAP. Five of the participants are enrolled in a Ph.D. program in the agricultural sciences.

For more information about PABGAP, visit <https://bit.ly/3u8ekyM>.

FULFILLING A DREAM, PURSUING AN OPPORTUNITY

Agriculture educator fosters student growth

By Russell Boone Jr.

Year after year, students from across the globe come to the United States to pursue a college degree and fulfill their educational and professional dreams.

Linda Hamilton was one of those students. A native of Ladyville, Belize, Hamilton traveled from her home country and matriculated to Fort Valley State University (FVSU). In the fall 2017, she earned a Bachelor of Science degree in agricultural education.

Since 2018, Hamilton has taught agriculture at Southwest Georgia College and Career Academy at Mitchell County High School in Camilla, Georgia.

“In addition to teaching the curriculum and managing greenhouse activities, I also take on the role of Future Farmers of America (FFA) advisor for the Mitchell County FFA Chapter,” the FVSU alumna said.

“This multifaceted position involves not only guiding students through their academic journey, but also preparing them for various competitions, honing their skills and fostering their growth beyond the classroom,” Hamilton said.

Interestingly, Hamilton initially wanted to pursue a career in education, but it wasn't in agriculture. She was studying to become an English teacher at the University of Belize, but thanks to her family having close ties with an FVSU professor, Dr. Eugene Amoah, her dream of coming to the U.S. and pursuing a college degree fell into place.

Amoah, now a retired animal science instructor and his wife Minerva, are close friends of Hamilton's family.

“My aunt, who worked with Mrs. Amoah, contacted me and asked if I was interested in studying in the U.S. Without even thinking, I



Fort Valley State alumna Linda Hamilton migrated from her home country of Belize and became an agricultural educator in Camilla, Georgia.

said yes! Since it was through Dr. Amoah that I was being recruited, my grandfather insisted that I pick

an agricultural major. I was a bit hesitant since it wasn't my first choice, but my strong desire to come to the U.S. led me to choose agricultural education, aligning with my goal of becoming a teacher,” Hamilton said.

After enrolling at FVSU, Hamilton started attending classes and immediately fell at ease with her decision.

“It truly felt like a family in all my classes. Every professor seemed genuinely dedicated to our learning and success. I wholeheartedly rate my undergraduate experience a perfect 10.”

While attending classes, Hamilton relied on the advice of Amoah and retired FVSU agricultural education professor Dr. Curtis Borne. “Dr. Amoah is like an uncle to me, and I would often drop by his office to discuss my grades and tell him how my classes were going. Dr. Borne served as my academic advisor and professor, and he encouraged me to stay in the field of agricultural education,” she said.

While pursuing her studies, Hamilton also enjoyed the life of a typical college student. She said some of her best memories come from meeting and hanging out with friends.

“I’m lucky to still be close with most of them,” she said. She also found time to join the FVSU Valley Girls, a campus community service organization. Hamilton also became an active member of the Student Government Association serving as director of student parking and pledged Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated.

To prepare herself for a career in agricultural education, Hamilton completed her student teaching at Perry High School in Perry, Georgia.

“I found the experience to be truly wonderful. Working alongside Mrs. Ashley Denton, I was able to absorb a wealth of knowledge in the limited time we had together,” Hamilton said.

As an agricultural educator, Hamilton says teaching outside of the classroom allows her to build connections with students, making the experience truly special.

“
It truly felt like a family in all my classes. Every professor seemed genuinely dedicated to our learning and success. I wholeheartedly rate my undergraduate experience a perfect 10.
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“Unlike an English teacher or other educators, being an ag teacher lets me engage with students in various settings. From after-school meetings, competitions and even traveling to Macon for a two-night trip to the state convention, I’m with my students every step of the way. To many of them, I’m their ‘school mom’, and it’s incredibly rewarding to be a role model they can look up to,” she said.

Furthermore, Hamilton said her enthusiasm and cheerfulness grabs students’ attention which keeps them engaged in the field of agriculture.

“I like to use a lot of hands-on and real-life activities in my lessons. For example, when I teach about agribusiness, playing a game of Monopoly is a fun way to keep the students interested,” she said.

Hamilton’s advice to a student seeking an agricultural degree at FVSU is to go for it. “Personally, I believe that FVSU has the absolute best agricultural program in Georgia. I might be a bit biased, but I always encourage my students to attend FVSU.”

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Hamilton and her students inspect plants grown in a raised bed garden during a class at Mitchell County High School.



'IT'S POSSIBLE!'

PLANT SCIENCE BIOTECHNOLOGY
ALUMNA FULFILLS CHILDHOOD DREAM
OF BECOMING A DOCTOR



By ChaNaè Bradley

The journey to become a doctor started well before Xavia Taylor stepped foot onto a college campus. The 28-year-old had desires of becoming a physician before she was old enough to know her timetables or perform long division.

Photo credit: Daniel Shippey/Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine (PCOM) South Georgia

“I started putting it into the atmosphere in second and third grade. At that age kids want to be a lot of different things. But for me, I wanted to be a physician and it stuck,” she said chuckling.

Taylor credits some of her desires to study medicine and early influences in healthcare to her great grandfather, Verdell Blount Sr.

“My grandfather was on the board of directors for the hospital in my hometown of Moultrie, Georgia. He would attend hospital retreats, and I would attend with him. I was able to sit in during meetings and meet doctors and talk to them at a very young age,” Taylor said.

Blount was a respected businessman, who managed a construction business most of his life. He also became the first African American on the hospital board in Colquitt County.

“The board was made up of impactful members of the community, and he was one of those people.”

Taylor recalls fond memories of her grandfather as well as his premature death. When she was 12 years old, Blount died from mesothelioma. In hindsight, Taylor believes exposure to asbestos was likely the cause of his cancer.

“His cancer was very eye opening to me. It was like watching life reverse. He went from an adult to a child,” Taylor said.

It was during that time, the Fort Valley State University (FVSU) alumna had a dream that she would one day be able to create a prevention for cancer and other deadly diseases.

“Til this day, I do not know the real meaning of that dream, but I can say that it has helped me along the way. ‘What if I’m the person that can help people in their time of need or sickness?’” she said.

With dreams and aspirations in her heart, Taylor finished high school in 2014 and solidified her childhood desires by attending Fort Valley State



Verdell Blount Sr., great grandfather of Xavia Taylor.

University on a full scholarship in agriculture with emphasis in plant science biotechnology.

“I was initially on a medicine track, but I did not want a basic biology degree. Plant science biotechnology allowed me to work in the lab all four years,” Taylor said. It also allowed Taylor to see projects outside of medicine and engage in hands on research. From that research, Taylor was able to produce posters and present her research at conferences and win awards as an undergraduate.

In addition to her academic pursuits, Taylor credits herself for pursuing a well-rounded college experience.

“I had a great time at Fort Valley,” she said fondly. “Although I had to be strong in my academics, I was still able to balance it and enjoy my college experience.”

Some of her most memorable moments include pledging Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated, serving for four years on the Student Government Association (SGA) and being an active member of the FVSU-Peach State- Louis Stokes Alliances for Minority Participation (LSAMP) program.

Taylor also completed a 10-week undergraduate summer research program at the University of Georgia. The summer research at UGA was funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF). The program provided cutting-edge research experiences to undergraduate Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) scholars.

During her summer program, she studied in the bio-molecular lab and conducted clustered

“
I was initially on a medicine track, but I did not want a basic biology degree. Plant science biotechnology allowed me to work in the lab all four years.
”

regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats (CRISPR) research. This technology allowed her to recognize different diseases and infections that attack the body.

“It is big in cancer research. At the time it was just beginning,” Taylor said.

Her summers also included shadowing a doctor near her hometown. During the summer of 2017, she learned about a medical school opening in Moultrie.

“I’d known of the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine (PCOM) and their Philadelphia campus, as well as their Suwanee campus in north Georgia. What I did not know is that there would be a campus in Moultrie,” she said. To her surprise, the Moultrie campus would be accepting its first class of medical students the year after she graduated from FVSU.

On May 5, 2018, Taylor graduated from FVSU with a Bachelor of Science degree. Five days later, she began studying for the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT). This eight-hour exam is one part of the application process for acceptance into medical school.

“I studied eight hours a day, like a full-time job,” she said.

Soon after, Taylor applied to PCOM South Georgia and was accepted. On August 21, 2019, she began medical school in her hometown and

became one of 55 students admitted into the first class. In the spring of 2023, Taylor became a

member of the first graduating class of PCOM South Georgia.

“It kind of just unfolded in a unique way,” she said, referencing how she ended up attending medical school in her hometown and serving her community. Now Taylor is an internal medicine resident at Archbold Memorial Medical Center in Thomasville, Georgia.

“I’ve enjoyed it so far. I have been able to see a lot of pathology. Internal medicine is giving me the ability to become a well-rounded doctor,” she said. Furthermore, the medical resident also enjoys seeing patients from her hometown.

“The fact that I was able to complete a medical degree in my hometown and give back to the people that have been rooting for me the whole time is rewarding,” she said.

As she reflects on her journey, she recounts her successes and challenges. Perseverance and humility are the lessons she’s learned.

“Never be afraid to ask for help. It is a journey, so it is important to remember to have a vision for yourself and to believe in yourself,” she said.

With goals of one day opening her own practice and increasing her knowledge through fellowships, the young doctor keeps two words in mind.

“It’s possible,” she said.

(Far left) In 2017, during her senior year at Fort Valley State University, Xavia Taylor received the National Role Model Award from Minority Access Incorporated during a conference in Washington D.C.

■ agCOMPLISH



WE BEFORE ME

A commitment to
service sets alumnus
up for success



By Latasha Ford

Casey Hunter has made a name for himself on Fort Valley State University's (FVSU) campus and beyond with his leadership, involvement and service to others. He lives by the motto, "We before me," which has set the tone for his rising success.

The senior animal science major graduated a semester early on Dec. 9, 2023, with a job offer from Corteva AgriScience already under his belt.

However, describing himself as an introvert, Hunter stepped onto FVSU's "yard" with reservation as he sought to become the outgoing Casey he is today. Joining the Wildcat pack in 2020 during the height of COVID-19 was an exciting but daunting adventure as he tried to adapt to a new environment, online learning and connecting with new people.

"Everything shifted right before I came to college, but there is always a blessing in the lesson," he said. "It prepared me for later down the road."

One thing he did know well was agriculture. The Perry, Georgia, native has roots in southwest Georgia. He recalled growing up on his paternal grandparents' farm in Grady County, where he learned to raise and show pigs as a youth for Future Farmers of America.

"That taught me about the agriculture market and responsibility. I had to check on them (pigs) every day regardless of whether I wanted to. But I saw the reward in it. That experience taught my brother and me many good character traits and values," he said.

Not only did his parents, Casie and Duchess Hunter, and grandparents expose him to

agriculture at a young age, they also educated him about Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Blue and Gold reigns strongly in the Hunter lineage with his father, great-aunt and several other family members graduating from FVSU. His older brother, Lazar Hunter, is also an FVSU alumnus with a degree in animal science, along with his father.

Therefore, FVSU was at the top of the list of college choices, and agriculture topped the list of degree options as well.

"Helping others and an industry that is always going to be in need led to my decision to pursue agriculture. It aligns with my passions," Hunter said.

The then-freshman stepped out of his comfort zone on campus and in the agriculture field. He built up his confidence when he ran for class president in his first semester and learned the importance of networking. Although he came in second place, this taught him: "What is reward without the risk?"

This outlook served Hunter well as he began taking advantage of the many opportunities that came his way. He became a member of the Alpha Pi Chapter of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Inc. and the National Collegiate Council for March of Dimes. He was also elected to serve on the FVSU Royal Court as Mister Sophomore and served as a senator for the FVSU Student Government Association.

Hunter also desired to experience diverse career options in agriculture, thereby committing to different roles for internships. In spring 2021, he interned at Baldwin County High School in Milledgeville, Georgia. He shadowed the agriculture teacher and assisted with creating

activities such as introducing healthy snacks to children. He also worked on the school farm and assisted with grant proposals.

Additionally, Hunter interned at the National Wildlife Federation through the Thurgood Marshall College Fund in the summer of 2021.

“It taught me a lot about myself as an individual but also as a professional,” he said. “It confirmed that I can do something big in the professional realm and can interact with people in different areas.”

In 2022, the Perry High School graduate worked at Perdue Farms in Perry, Georgia, as a plant operations intern, gaining production experience. Then, in the summer of 2023, he worked at Syngenta as a crop protection sales intern.

“I traveled to south Georgia, north Florida and southeast Alabama to work primarily with their new peanut seed formulation by collecting data in various locations,” Hunter explained.

He spent a lot of time in the peanut field but also gained some knowledge about the research process from scientists at the University of Georgia and Auburn University. His experience further involved meeting with retailers and growers.



Casey Hunter and his peers are intrigued about the process of shea butter production while in Ghana.

“It was very insightful. I put my best foot forward,” he said.

In November 2022, Hunter joined six other FVSU students to take the trip of a lifetime to West Africa to learn about the operation of cocoa and shea butter production. He expressed while in Africa, “This experience and the knowledge I’ve gained have been so pivotal for me in wanting to become a change agent within the agricultural sector.”

Working toward this purpose, Hunter served as an Agriculture Future of America (AFA) Ambassador and on the AFA Student Advisory Team. He commended FVSU’s Fanisha Maze, a collegiate liaison for AFA. “She saw potential in me that I didn’t see. That potential became fulfilled opportunities,” he said.

His connection with AFA led to an interview with Corteva AgriScience. He will work in sales for the seed and crop protection division under the Associate Territory Management Development Program.

“I will be the only African American in my cohort,” Hunter said. “That is another reason why I want to be in agriculture. Not too many people look like me. There are perspectives to be heard and understood. I am glad I am leading the pathway.”

Among these vast opportunities, Hunter is also a recipient of the FVSU 1890 Scholarship, the James H. Porter Scholarship and others. He attributes his success to God first, his family and his perseverance.

“I struggled with self-confidence. I proved to me that I could make a name for myself. Fort Valley creates that environment to make you want to chase your dreams and do something outside your comfort zone and excel in it,” he said, commending FVSU mentors such as Barcado Styles and Dr. Archie Williams.

“I could not have done it without that support and welcoming spirit,” he added.

His advice to students is: “If you put yourself in a box, you are only growing as far as that box. Be open to different ideas and opinions. You can come to Fort Valley and still be yourself. The avenues, networking and professionalism are all here at FVSU.”



Alumna builds bridges by taking chances

By **Latasha Ford**

“Opportunity will always find those that it is meant to find” is Shandrea Stallworth’s motto for how her learning and work experiences led to becoming a senior agronomist for the second largest pet food manufacturer in the world.

The Biloxi, Mississippi, native dreamed of becoming a medical doctor. Agriculture never

crossed her mind as a possible career choice. Not realizing the broadness of the agricultural field, Stallworth expanded her perspective at Fort Valley State University (FVSU).

She moved around a lot throughout her childhood since her father served in the military. However, when he received orders for Hawaii her senior year, she decided to live with her aunt who

was stationed at Robins Air Force Base in Warner Robins, Georgia. Her aunt recommended that she attend nearby FVSU.

Still interested in becoming a medical doctor, Stallworth said her parents did not attend college, so she felt like a fish out of water. It took FVSU plant biotechnology professor Dr. Sarwan Dhir to spark her curiosity in plant science and biotechnology.

Dhir pitched the program and enrolled her in the Introduction to Biotechnology course. “I had never been so intrigued,” she admitted.

One of her first experiential learning activities was dissecting plants. She learned how to use a gene gun to observe the success of an experiment.

“It was the first time I saw immediate success in a science project. I had never been in a space where I could problem solve and critically

think,” Stallworth said. “I realized there is not a big difference between a medical doctor and scientist. I can be a doctor in my own right.”

She laughed noting it was a running joke while at FVSU that she was meant to major in agriculture. Many people thought she had a connection to the Stallworth Agricultural Research Building on campus (named in honor of agriculture professor Dr. Houston Stallworth).

Although there is no connection, Stallworth believes she was destined to pursue agriculture. During her time at the historically Black university, she presented at several conferences and mentored other agricultural students.

“That put me so ahead of my peers. The only choice was to attend graduate school,” she said.

The FVSU graduate earned her degree in plant science and biotechnology in 2011. Her path diverted as she pursued a master’s in public



Above: Shandrea Stallworth shines as a participant in Fort Valley State University’s homecoming festivities.

Below: Shown with her parents, Stallworth flashes her Wildcat smile after graduating from FVSU with a bachelor’s degree in plant science and biotechnology in 2011.



Above: Engaging with fellow Wildcats in community service, Stallworth is a spring 2009 initiate of FVSU’s Zeta Pi Chapter of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Inc.

Below: Stallworth graduated from Mississippi State University in 2021 and was the first in 20 years to receive a Ph.D. in weed physiology and genetics from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.



health online but decided to apply to Auburn University. It took the support of Dr. James Brown, FVSU's agricultural and natural resources program leader and former Auburn professor, to turn a lost opportunity into a second chance.

Stallworth received a full-ride scholarship through Auburn's Louis Stokes Alliances for Minority Participation (LSAMP) Bridge to Ph.D. Program because of her participation in FVSU's LSAMP Program. She studied crop, soil and environmental sciences with a focus in plant breeding, where she engaged in peanut research.

Coming from FVSU, Stallworth gained not only knowledge but good work ethics. This prepared her for the challenges she faced at Auburn when she questioned her abilities due to a professor. It took another professor speaking up for her that encouraged her to stay.

"I realized how protected I was at Fort Valley State," she said. "My major had diverse students even though I was at an HBCU."

Stallworth further found her voice when joining the Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences (MANRRS) program and the Black Graduate and Professional Association at Auburn.

"That was how agriculture stuck for me," she said, after becoming a national officer with MANRRS. "These opportunities kept me going. I had a space to be myself and make connections. That was my family."

Stallworth earned her master's degree in 2016 and soon after started her doctoral program at Mississippi State University (MSU) in the plant and soil sciences department. She was recruited to her home state at the MANRRS Regional Conference after eavesdropping on a conversation. This opportunity also offered a full-ride scholarship to study weed physiology and genetics.

On making the decision to focus on genetics, the Mississippian's first encounter with a Black female geneticist was at FVSU.

"I would have never thought this was possible if I had not seen my favorite biology professor, Dr. Shakespeare," she said. "I wanted to be a trailblazer like her."

Opportunities at MSU included interning at Corteva Agriscience and serving as a three-time National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) graduate research fellow. NASA

supported her research on rice production and her work on developing a program that exposes K-12 students to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). She graduated in 2021 and was the first in 20 years to receive a Ph.D. in weed physiology and genetics from MSU's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

Stallworth then started her career at Corteva Agrisciences as a weed scientist and herbicide biologist. A year later, she transitioned to nonprofit organization Rodale Institute in Atlanta, Georgia, to help grow the regenerative organic movement through agricultural research, education and outreach. Stallworth enjoyed serving a 13-state region, offering technical assistance and educational resources to farmers and producers.

"Organic production is a huge space that minorities could occupy, especially in vegetable production," she advised.

A farmer's praise of her work solidified her place in agriculture. The bridge to another career opportunity opened when Nestlé Purina PetCare contacted her on LinkedIn in 2023.

"I am going back into the science space as a senior specialty scientist," Stallworth said. "I will be responsible for the global implementation and acceleration of regenerative agriculture programs across all five regions of Nestlé Purina PetCare."

The young professional looks forward to growing in her new role to make an impact on sustainability.

"I really get to chart my own path. It gives me that same excitement I had starting my Ph.D.," she said.

Her aspiration is to one day win the World Food Prize.

"It is equivalent to the Nobel Peace Prize for agricultural scientists," Stallworth explained. "My sole purpose now is to expose people to regenerative agriculture practices. It gives me a space to put minorities right in the center of it."

Her advice to students is to not accept "no" and to not be afraid to be a trailblazer.

"You never know what opportunity comes out of it," she said.

■ agCOMPLISH

MAINTAINING THE OPERATION

Extension farm manager sustains 1,176 acres to aid in Extension and research projects

By Russell Boone Jr.

For more than 43 years, Jared Fluellen has maintained the farm at Fort Valley State University.

The farm, officially known as Fort Valley State University's Agricultural Research Station since 1980, has two sections totaling 1,176 acres. On the farm one can find corn, pecans, peaches, soybeans and crops used in biofuel production. Livestock raised at the facility include sheep, cattle, goats and horses.

"As farm manager, my main responsibilities include purchasing equipment, livestock, and arranging the maintenance and repair of machinery and buildings on the farm. I also plan activities for staff and student workers, oversee budgeting, record keeping and sales," Fluellen said.

Additionally, the FVSU farm manager said he coordinates actions on the farm such as planting, harvesting, irrigation, chemical application and assisting scientists with research plots and layouts.

Much of his work is influenced by his childhood. Fluellen grew up on a 150-acre farm in Perry, Georgia, where the family grew various crops including cotton, peanuts, wheat, soybeans and small vegetables. They also had a farrowing and feeder pig operation.

"I enjoyed working on the farm with my father. During my younger years, I was infatuated with driving our tractor and watching the crops grow," Fluellen said.



As he grew older, Fluellen realized that there was more to farming than watching crops grow and driving farm equipment. It was then he decided to attend college and major in agriculture. As an undergraduate student at FVSC, Fluellen participated in extra-curricular activities such as the Animal Science Club and the Agri-Demic Forum.

After graduation, Fluellen worked as a feed and animal health products manager in Athens, Georgia. While working in Athens, Fluellen knew he wanted to be a farm manager somewhere, but he did not foresee it happening at FVSU.

In 1979, the position of farm manager opened at FVSU, and Fluellen immediately applied for the opportunity. “I was elated to be selected to fill the position, especially since I was already familiar with the layout of the farm area due to my undergraduate days at FVSU,” he said.

Fluellen, given a free hand in developing the layout of the farm, immediately started building on his plans. Thanks to his vision, the farm is what it is today. “I worked closely with research directors and Extension administrators to develop the farm layout so it could assist the research, Extension and teaching programs,” he said.

Furthermore, the longtime FVSU employee says it is a pleasure to pass down information and knowledge to those with a genuine interest in farming. “Hopefully, they will learn and grow from my advice and enhance their work experience. I want people to avoid the pitfalls that I may have experienced in farming. It’s always advantageous to provide knowledge to farmers who will come behind you.”

Moreover, Fluellen enjoys the fact that his job gives him the chance to work with students and scientists, in addition to adapting to the latest technology used in agriculture. He also delights in the teamwork needed to run the farm. He said it provides him with fuel to develop innovative ideas.

“The scientists and students push me to learn more so that I can better serve them in various capacities. The job is challenging, and I never know what it entails from day to day. I also enjoy using the latest in advanced machinery and how it improves job productivity,” he said. Some of this equipment includes livestock barns using Wi-Fi and webcams, automatic feeders for animals and climate control systems.

As a veteran farmer, Fluellen said it is an exciting but challenging endeavor that is expensive, requires a thorough work ethic and is time consuming, but enjoyable.

“I would suggest that an individual interested in farming should work on a farm for one or two years. I would tell them to keep their operation simple, be willing to adapt to new procedures, and not try to do everything alone. Accept things that you cannot control and be appreciative of the feeling of grace and reward when successfully meeting your goals for the year.”



Fluellen discusses the depth of planted seeds to faculty and students conducting research at the Fort Valley State University farm.

In addition, he said farmers with access to educational opportunities

can achieve success. “Farming is now more specialized than it was when I started with my father. It has become a high-tech job that requires some sort of education. Seventy percent of farmers have a higher education degree, a vocational certificate or diploma in the trade,” he said.

Fluellen is married to his wife of 39 years, Vivian (an FVSU alumna) and they are the parents of six children.

UNDECIDED ABOUT YOUR MAJOR?



Selecting a major in college may be easy for some, but for those who are undecided, agriculture is a viable option. Fort Valley State University offers 12 degrees through its College of Agriculture, Family Sciences and Technology. These programs can prepare students to become dietitians, engineers, or veterinarians just to name a few. Below is a list of programs offered that can be a jumpstart to an exciting career.

- › Agricultural Economics
- › Agricultural Education
- › Agricultural Engineering Technology
- › Electronic Engineering Technology
- › Family & Consumer Science
 - Food and Nutrition
 - Infant and Child Development
- › Plant Science
 - Environmental soil science
 - Biotechnology
- › Veterinary Technology
- › Biotechnology (M.S.)
 - Plant
 - Animal
 - Applied
- › Animal Science (M.S.)
- › Public Health (MPH)
 - Environmental Health

What can graduates do with a degree from the College of Agriculture?

Students are prepared for many careers; Possible jobs include:

- › Economist
- › Teacher
- › Veterinary Technician
- › County Extension Agent
- › Government employee

For more information, visit:
ag.fvsu.edu/academics

or contact:
Fanisha Maze
marketing and outreach coordinator
478-342-8215
mazef@fvsu.edu

STUDENTS ON THE RISE

Fort Valley State student selected as USDA/1890 National Scholar

Jalil Jones, a Fort Valley State University (FVSU) freshman, is one among 103 students selected nationwide for the 2023 U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)/1890 National Scholars Program.

The USDA partners with 1890 Land-grant Universities to provide scholarship recipients with full tuition, fees, books, and room and board. The scholarship also includes work experience through USDA summer internships. USDA's Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement manages the 1890 National Scholars Program. It is aimed at increasing the number of students from rural and underserved communities, who attend one of the 19 1890 Land-grant Universities and pursue degrees in agriculture, food, natural resource sciences or related academic disciplines.

The USDA/1890 National Scholars Program has awarded many FVSU students, who have applied over the years. Currently, there are 12 scholars at FVSU being sponsored by five USDA agencies and nine states.

Jones is grateful to receive funds to go toward his education. "Being able to maintain a scholarship is something I am prepared to do," he affirmed.

Once interested in building rockets, the 18-year-old Wildcat is studying agricultural

engineering. He aspires to use his artistic abilities to design and build machinery as an agricultural engineer for the USDA.

"I want to create something from what I have learned from school and work experiences," Jones said.

The Oakland, California, native will intern for the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (his sponsoring agency) in the summer of 2024 in Arizona. An FVSU alumnus selected him for this opportunity. Putting in the work, Jones is looking forward to the experience.

He said his time on FVSU's campus as a freshman has been welcoming. He knew that he wanted to attend a historically Black university when considering his options. His parents are Tuskegee University graduates. They exposed him to various colleges by taking him to a college fair in Oakland while in high school. This is where he learned about FVSU and the USDA/1890 National Scholars Program.

"I know that I must do certain things to progress in life," Jones said about the choices he has made.

His advice to students interested in attending FVSU and applying to the USDA/1890



National Scholars Program is: "If you want to work toward something, you should not give up on it because you may miss opportunities you don't take."

The agricultural engineering major strongly suggests that students also give themselves more grace. "Take a moment to appreciate the things you have accomplished," he said.

USDA awarded more than 100 1890 scholarships in Fiscal Year 2023. The 2024 application cycle opened in December 2023. For more information, visit <https://bit.ly/USDA1890scholar> or contact Karla Hollis, USDA liaison, at karla.hollis@usda.gov.

Fort Valley State awarded NextGen grant to cultivate student success



Fort Valley State University (FVSU) will share in the benefits of an \$18 million grant awarded to 1890 land-grant partner Tennessee State University's (TSU) College of Agriculture to support the next generation of professionals in agricultural careers.

This U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) grant is through the NextGen grant program. The purpose is to enable minority serving institutions to build and sustain the next generation of the food, agriculture, natural resources and human sciences workforce. TSU's project entitled, "NEXTGENeration Inclusion Consortium for Building the Food, Agriculture, Natural Resources and Human Sciences Pipeline (FANHP)" is led by principal investigator Dr. John C. Ricketts, professor in the Department of Agricultural Sciences at TSU.

FVSU's College of Agriculture, Family Sciences and Technology

(CAFST) received a \$1,316,596 subaward from this NIFA-funded grant for five years. Dr. Hari Singh, professor in the Department of Agricultural Sciences, is the principal investigator, and Dr. Mohammed Ibrahim, associate dean for academics in the CAFST, is the co-principal investigator.

Singh and Ibrahim explained that their main goal is to provide paid summer internships for high school students interested in attending FVSU and hands-on research engagements at other institutions for current students. Annual study abroad opportunities are part of the grant as well.

In addition, the FVSU research duo plan to establish and fund academic scholarships rewarding underserved students in-state and out of state involved in 4-H, Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANRRS), Junior MANRRS and Future Farmers of America (FFA). This will help build student leaders in areas of need

to support their development academically and professionally. Singh noted FVSU will also offer a USDA NIFA-funded College of Agriculture course sharing network called Parchment. This system will allow students to have access to different curricula in agriculture.

"The possibilities of this grant will boost the interest of students and help develop a workforce for the next generation," Singh expressed. "The course serving network will be a major advantage."

He and Ibrahim are excited about the scholarships, which is a financial benefit, but also the outreach students will experience through networking and developing relationships.

"Students acquiring soft skills will be tremendous," Ibrahim said, referring to their participation in conferences and traveling abroad to immerse themselves in diverse cultures.

In addition to FVSU, TSU is partnering with faculty from Alcorn State University, the University of Houston, Chief Dull Knife College, Middle Tennessee State University, University of Tennessee – Martin, University of Tennessee – Knoxville, Virginia Tech, Vanderbilt University and the MANRRS organization.

The NextGen grant program is a part of USDA NIFA's \$262.5 million investment in institutions of higher education to develop future diverse agricultural professionals. The program is funded by President Joe Biden's Inflation Reduction Act. Of the 33 awarded projects across 24 states, only five were awarded in Tier 3, projects up to \$20 million and including at least three institutions across two states.

Fort Valley State graduate student wins grand prize for research

Vera Arthur, a Fort Valley State University (FVSU) biotechnology graduate student, took home the grand prize award for her cutting-edge research at the ninth annual Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) Climate Change Conference in New Orleans in fall 2023.

Her poster presentation focused on the use of pulsed ultraviolet (UV) light and cold plasma to control E. coli on pecans. Arthur conducted her research in the Food Engineering Laboratory on FVSU's campus under the guidance of adviser Dr. Ajit Mahapatra, research assistant Hema Degala and post-doctoral researcher Dr. Rabin Gyawali.

"They have been very supportive. Their reviews and suggestions are the reason I was able to do it," she said about the win while also acknowledging Dr. Beverly Wright, coordinator of the conference.

"Vera is one of the brightest students I have ever had. She is self-driven and has done a truly exceptional job in both her research and course work," Mahapatra commended. "I hope she continues to pursue research, because I think she has the potential to be a great food scientist. I am so proud of her."

Arthur received \$500 and a certificate for the grand prize at the conference. Approximately 25 students competed. She explained that the theme focused on climate change and how industries are contributing to the problem.



"We cannot advocate for a close-down of industries because they offer a lot of benefits for the country," she noted. "With science and technology, there are so many activities that can be done in a safe and efficient way. I introduced my research methods on decontaminating pecans that can be used without polluting the environment."

Pecans are a top commodity in Georgia. According to the Georgia Pecan Commission, Georgia is the nation's top producer of pecans, producing

an estimated 100 million pounds of pecans annually. Pecans add between \$200 million and \$300 million each year to the state's gross domestic product.

Arthur is also studying the effects of using cold plasma alone and in conjunction with the pulsed UV light. Part of her research is done in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Agricultural Research Service (ARS) laboratory in Byron, Georgia, which is near FVSU's campus. She commended the USDA ARS team for allowing her to use

their cold plasma technology and for funding her project.

“The research is ongoing. So far, the pulsed UV light and cold plasma are both effective individually at decontaminating E. coli,” Arthur revealed. Further research will involve examining the duration of using these methods to kill more bacteria and any visible effects on the product.

Arthur looks forward to continuing her exploration on an issue that she hopes to solve. “I would be happy if we are able to introduce this to the food industry to help scale up farmers’ production,” she declared.

Her passion for science stemmed from her desire to be a doctor after graduating high school. The Ghana native said her father, who she admires, recommended that she attend medical school, which diverted to food science being the best fit for her.

Always interested in the lab, she recalled traveling five hours to another location in Ghana to use a tester analyzer equipment to conduct research while pursuing her undergraduate degree in food science. She is appreciative of the opportunity to have access to advanced equipment and labs at FVSU.

“I have seen a lot of improvement in myself,” the Wildcat said, beaming.

Upon obtaining her master’s degree in biotechnology, Arthur plans to pursue a Ph.D. and continue her scientific journey as a researcher in the academic arena or food industry.



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Contact us at fvsu.ag@gmail.com

A map of Georgia and its neighboring states (Alabama, Florida, South Carolina, and Tennessee) is shown. The state of Georgia is highlighted in yellow, and a blue star is placed in the center of Georgia. White arrows point from the neighboring states towards the star in Georgia, indicating the scope of the neighbor waiver program.

FVSU offers Neighbor Waivers!
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